

MODERNITY AND MARGINALITY IN R.K. NARAYAN'S NOVELS

RAJ KISHOR SINGH

Sanothimi Campus Tribhuvan University, Nepal

ABSTRACT

R. K. Narayan narrows down his fictional world to a Southern place, which was then a small-village-like town but now grown to a big city, Malgudi. The town now stands midway- on the one hand with numerous contradictory old and superstitious beliefs and culture, and on the other hand, with glamour and attraction of the modern beliefs and living standards. The present article deals with the issues of modernity and marginality, the ever-going conflict between the old and the new, the ancient and the modern spirit, and the orthodox and the liberal approaches to social life and problems in Malgudi, on the basis of Narayan's novels. His novels present a microcosm of Indian macrocosm with religions, beliefs and culture.

KEYWORDS: Ancient, Modern, Malgudi, Hinduism. Christianity, Muslim Religion, Orthodoxy

INTRODUCTION

The most dominant form of conflict in the fictional world of Narayan is one between tradition and modernity. This is a recurrent feature and there is a continuous nibbling of the traditional values and modes of life by the forces of new civilisation. But in this conflict, it is the old tradition that gains an edge over modernity. The modern simply touches the outer fringe of the society and does not, however, penetrate the inner most circles. The Malgudi milieu stands in perpetual danger of numerous contradictions caused by old beliefs, superstitions and age-old culture on the one hand and glamour and attraction of the modern life-style and civilisation.

Narayan is clear on one point that Indian sensibility is different from the western sensibility and hence his novels have to embody a widely different mentality, feelings and responses. The Malgudians are thoroughly religious, god fearing and conservative in thought and attitude. What C.D. Narasimhaiah speaks of an average Hindu man is true of an average Malgudian too:

"The Hindu man drinks religiously, sleeps religiously, walks religiously, marries religiously and robs religiously.¹

Religion in Malgudians who are in majority of the cases, Hindus, is deep rooted. Indians believe that marriages are made in heaven and solemnised on earth and the meeting between a bride and bridegroom takes place more by decree of fate than by coincidence or planning. Courtship is wholly uncalled for in a tradition-ridden Hindu set up and matching of horoscopes is an essential precondition for the solemnisation of a Hindu marriage. The boy and the girl are allowed to meet only after marriage and not before it. In this connection, the following contention is highly remarkable:

"We, however, seek excitement in our system of living, known as the joint family in which several members of a family live under the same roof. The strains and stresses of this kind of living on the individual, the general structure of the society emerging from it and the complexities of the caste system are inexhaustible subjects for us. And the hold of religion and the conception ingrained in us must necessarily find a place in any portrayal of life. Nor can we overlook the rural life and its problems, eighty five out of a hundred Indians being village folk."²

The Malgudi culture is based on religion which sometimes borders on orthodoxy even to the extent of eccentricity.

Modernity and Marginality in a Clash

Narayan's novels right from '*Swami and Friends*' to '*A Tiger for Malgudi*' present a traditional society. It experiences tangible changes because of the incursions of modernity. There is everywhere, a perceptible clash, an ever-going conflict between the old and the new, the ancient and the modern spirit and the orthodox and the liberal approach to social problems. Malgudi makes advancement against the background of a changing Indian society. This advancement affects the place geographically, socially and culturally. Experience replaces innocence and Malgudi gets well set to embrace the modern spirit. The swift changes affect the orthodox Indian society with all its age old beliefs and superstitions. The incongruities and contradictions proceed from collision of old conventions with the modern spirit. In this connection Graham Greene aptly observes:

*".....the life of Malgudi never ruffled by politics proceeds in exactly the same way as it has done for centuries, in the juxtaposition of the age old convention and the modern character provides much of the comedy."*³

The Malgudi existence is bi-polar-one resting on age old beliefs and values and the other on westernised way of living and economic progress. The grandmothers, uncles and aunts with their rigid religious beliefs and caste restrictions stand diametrically opposed to a set of young generation. The coming in of modern civilisation into an orthodox South Indian town manifests itself in many forms:

*"Into this small South Indian town with its orthodox Indian values, the modern civilisation comes in all manifestations raising a flutter here and there, disturbing the quiet waters of Malgudi life."*⁴

Malgudi, during the 1930s, is a small town with an officers' club, two schools, a Municipal Board and a Town Hall. Its changes, are quick and rapid enough to envelope it in a thin veil of modernity. Nallappa's mango grove and Mempi forests are there only to signify the existence of traditional resorts for sportive fun and frolics but new extensions, cricket clubs and various other features of modern civilisation add new dimension and hue to the milieu. Malgudi's ties with ancient traditions are strong but not so lasting as to counter the compulsions of outward changes. The geographical changes are perceptively apparent. The appearance of a railway station adds to the tourist attraction of the place. The Englandia Insurance Company, Truth Printing Works, The Regal Hair cutting Saloon, Anand Bhavan, the Central Cooperative Land Mortgage Bank, the Sunrise Studio, Lawley Extension and many other institutions bring Malgudi's existence closer to modernity. K.R.S. Iyengar aptly remarks:

*"In Malgudi too, there are extensions with their cross roads and trim houses. There is Lawley Extension named after Sir Frederick Lawley but later renamed as 'Gandhi Nagar'."*⁵

If, in '*Swami and Friends*', there is an exciting car ride to the club, Ramani in '*The Dark Room*' has his own chevrolet in which he takes out Shanta Bai for the pleasure drives to the Saryu:

*"Even in '*Swami and Friends*' we hear of motors cars and Swami has an exciting car ride to the club in his father's friend's car. In *The Dark Room*, the hero (Ramani) has his own chevrolet with its hoarse hooting and it comes in handy when he takes out his mistress, Shanta, for moon lit drives to the banks of the Saryu."*⁶

Kabir street, Vinayaka Mudali Street, Ellamman Street and Anderson Lane and many others have come up in Malgudi in large numbers with their dominant overtones of modern civilisation. Gaffur appears as a taxi-driver in *The Guide* and *The Painter of Signs* representing all the distinct features of the Malgudi town. Mempi Forests provide the Malgudians with everything that grows under the sun and also that is needed for modern living-tea, bamboos, medicinal herbs, teak wood for furniture and rose wood plank for painting sign boards. In Malgudi, there spring up discernible under-currents of modernity. As it opens up its doors to the external world, the western civilisation clandestinely creeps in. Malgudi's simple economy is replaced by a complex one. All types of conflicts specially relating to domestic life, love affairs, tradition versus modernity, attitudes and motivations, East versus West, old versus New are seen in action. The tension between the two sets of values and modes inevitably manifests itself in totality:

*"Domestic life versus passionate love, scholar versus sadhu, the claims of duty versus the claims of art, an easy war society versus a cold but correct individualism, tradition versus modernity-no matter how we phrase the various paradoxes and conflicts-of attitude and motivation in the novel, the important fact is that one side in the issue is no longer treated as chimerical or illusory and the other as real, Narayan recognizes the strength and reality of each."*⁷

Modernity and modernized characters have been made the main butt of irony in the fictional world of Narayan. In this connection, O.P. Mathur aptly observes:

*"Modernization and modernized characters were targets of irony in many of Narayan's major novels like The Guide, The Man Eater of Malgudi, Mr. Sampath and The Vendor of Sweets. But in The Painter of Signs they are viewed with marked approval."*⁸

This 'marked approval' never comes to the fore but the old and the new exist together in an incongruous relationship with each other against a background which is essentially traditional.

In Narayan's fiction, the Malgudi men are caught in a mess caused by the tussle between the old tradition and modern civilization. Their life is crisscrossed by tradition and modernity. They encounter such situations as are incongruous and at times absurd. Individual aspirations and an urge for personal adventurism directly flow from the modern civilization- the natural outcome of western education, adoption of new life styles and significant advancements made in the materialistic field. Individualism becomes a well founded ideal under new conditions. But those are doggedly hindered by the old Indian tradition that still commands force and asserts itself more in community life than in individual pursuits. The old order changes giving place to new and the tussle between the two goes on forever. The middle class which emerges as a result of new education and industrialization and with which Narayan is chiefly concerned finds itself placed in a in the materialistic field. The middle class that emerges as result of new education-system finds itself in a desperate predicament. In this connection, the following contention is highly remarkable,

*"The middle class character oscillates between the old and new, ambition and humility, between morality and hypocrisy. This plight of his, of course, does not forebode any great disaster. Because of his typical middle class character, he can neither be a king nor a commoner. His troubles and sufferings, his misunderstandings and misadventures, are in the end, washed by the cohesion of the community."*⁹

*"To be a good writer, anywhere, you must have roots both in religion and in family."*¹⁰

Said R.K. Narayan to Ved Mehta in an interview. Narayan has his roots both in religion and in family. Coming as he does of a traditional Hindu Brahmin family, he has to his credit all the religious traits attributed to him in his writings.

His characters too are Hindus, leading ones of them being Brahmins. They represent Hindu view of religion as it is found in south India today. Some of the minor characters are either Christians or Mohammadans. Professor Brown in '*Swami and Friends*' and '*The Bachelor of Arts*', Mr. Ebenezar, the scripture master in '*Swami and Friends*' Mathieson in '*Waiting for the Mahatma*' and Grace in '*The Vendor of Sweets*' are Christian characters while Aziz- the peon of Albert Mission College and Gaffur, the taxi driver of Malgudi are Muslims. They belong to a class of minor characters who hardly deserve attention. Malgudi, the typical South Indian town is mostly inhabited by Hindus, Christians or Anglo-Indians or even Muslims, form microscopic segments of population which is pre-eminently Hindu dominated. The area is free from communal bias or any sort of antagonism religious or otherwise. Conversion to Christianity is the root cause of evil in the locality. Constant indoctrination in schools leads the students to infer that Hindu religion is irrational and devoid of scientific temper and that of all the religions in the world, Christianity is the best. Ebenezar, the scripture master, sarcastically preaches:

*"Why do you worship, dirty, lifeless, wooden idols and stone images? Can they talk? No, can they see? No, can they bless you? No, can they take you to heaven? No. Why? Because they have no life. What did your gods to when Mohammed Ghazani smashed them to pieces, trod upon them, constructed out of them steps for his lavatory? If those idols and images had life why did they not parry Mohammad's on sloughs."*¹¹

Swaminathan's blood burns with resentment while Ebenezar, the Christian fanatic tears his left ear off in disgust. Narayan himself recounts his personal experiences:

*"The Scripture classes were mostly devoted to attacking and lampooning the Hindu gods and violent abuses were heaped on idol worshippers as a prelude to glorifying Jesus."*¹²

The missionary preachers incite the listeners to embrace Christianity for receiving God's benedictions by hurling abuses on Hindu religion and its ideologies and in turn receive grass, mud and water:

*"What I suffered in the class as a non Christian" Says Narayan, "Was nothing compared to what a Christian missionary suffered when he came to preach at our street corner."*¹³

The conflict surfaces with Hindu boys suffering in Christian schools and Christian missionaries meeting the same treatment in streets. This leads to religious animosities between the two sects- the Hindus and Christians who had lived together in close harmony until the war of words started by the latter over the former gripped them. The Christians too fail to digest criticism of their faith. Swaminathan calls to question the godliness of Christ only for His non-vegetarianism:

*"If he was a God, why did he eat flesh and fish and drink wine." Being a Brahmin boy, it is unthinkable for him that God should ever be a non vegetarian. Ebenezar puffs and fumes with anger and advances menacingly towards Swaminathan to 'wrench his left ear off.'*¹⁴

The antagonistic attitudes expose clash of convictions and collision of feelings for which neither of the two is prepared to relent.

Raju's father entertains similar notions about Albert Mission School. In this connection, Raju's recollection at a later stage is remarkable -

*"I'd have felt proud to call myself an Albert Mission boy. But often I heard my father declare 'I don't want to send my boy there, it seems they want to convert our boys into Christians and are all the time insulting our gods."*¹⁵

The Hindu religious cannons scarcely admit of any sort of communion with Christians. Even those with liberal and modern views fail to muster enough courage either to sit or eat with Christian counter parts. Even Jagan -a true follower of Gandhi and a non-believer in caste-system, declines to accept food prepared by Grace. A Christian girl in a Hindu household is a taboo. Jagan's sister even feels ashamed of referring to him as her brother because he has in his house:

*"a beef eating Christian girl for a daughter-in-law."*¹⁶

Raman's aunt in '*The Painter of Signs*' gets prepared to leave for Varanasi as she comes to know of his intention of marrying Daisy whose very name smacks of Christianity.

CONCLUSIONS

The Indian microcosm, Malgudi, is a sample or a model, representing the Indian culture in minutiae scale, showing the differences among people, their beliefs and culture, but yet living in peace and harmony. All the details discussed above unfold the conflicting trends in Malgudi that Hindus, Christians and Muslims may live together but with no willingness to merge with each other socially or culturally.

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